

WHAT'S BETTER THAN STREISAND?

Holiday Disc Picks

"It's our Christmas issue," my editor sighed. "I *hope* you'll review the new **Barbra Streisand** LP. I nodded. Babs seems to come with the job. The way I figure it, she is supposed to be an inspiration, the ugly-duckling outsider who turned triumphant diva — talent and chutzpah winning out over prejudice and circumstance. Gay revenge!

I never quite bought it, but I did immerse myself in her latest LP, *Till I Loved You* (CBS). It was perfect. It sounded like the soundtrack to an Alan Alda movie. The only thing remarkable was her dud duet with boyfriend Don Johnson. Even that wasn't daring, just vapid.

Then I found an album full of grit, glamour, and self-invention — a *true* inspiration. It's called *Three Gals, Three Guitars* (Cabazon/Blue Yonder) by the **Del Rubio Triplets**. The trio are identical siblings, over-the-hill show girls who taught themselves to play guitar so as to launch a new career a decade back. They perform in matching majorette suits and white Beatle boots, picking and harmonizing to their own eccentric arrangements of an inspired repertoire that ranges from "Besame Mucho" and "Ding Dong, the Witch Is Dead" to "Hey, Jude" and "Walk Like an Egyptian."

The triplets are more exotic than the Bulgarian Chorus, more daring than Streisand, and more entertaining than either. The act is a bit like a benign and joyous version of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* If the Del Rubios are bizarre, they're also heartwarming; they may be preposterous, but they are never pathetic. They remake glamour and contemporary pop in their own image — part of which is anchored permanently in decades long past. I've seen men who were initially worried come delightfully unhinged over their album. Unlike Streisand's, it promises to make any misfit marvel and laugh out loud. Consider it my number one holiday disc tip. Others follow.

Copperhead Road (Uni). **Steve Earle** is the Patrick Swayze of rock — tough, sexy, and poignant. It's all there in his voice, illuminating the love songs on side 2. The first side's socially conscious storytelling overreaches, but the five cuts of rugged, redemptive love and regret are my kind of glory.

Green (Warner Bros.). **R.E.M.** returns on a new label, rambunctious and resplendent with singer Stipe finally articulating his lyrics. There are echoes of Eric Burdon, Patti Smith, and even Paul Revere and the Raiders on different cuts (and resonances of Crosby and Nash and George Harrison on "Wrong Child" and "Hairshirt"), but there's no mistaking these scuffed, soulful scoundrels. In tandem with *Eponymous* (IRS), a greatest-hits disc from

the group's last label, *Green* supports the oft-made claim that R.E.M. is the best band in the land.

Rattle & Hum (Island). U2's blazing audio scrapbook of their safari through America last year is far more lively and compelling than the film of the same name — even as the hunters often get captured by the game.

Lovely (RCA). **The Primitives'** debut LP often sounds like Debbie

Harry leading the Go-Gos or fronting The Woodentops, but this group has a pure pop assurance that explodes the comparisons. Candy-coated barbs.

Lucinda Williams (Rough Trade). This showcases one knockabout Southern girl who lays Emmylou Harris's tawny vocal purity on Bonnie Raitt's sassy funk, with an LP of self-penned tunes that outshines her two elders' recent output. She's not so novel but *truly* winning.

Seven Year Itch (Island). After frustrating fans for years with unfocused, eclectic solo efforts, **Etta James** reunites with Memphis and Muscle Shoals, the sidemen on this set of blistering R&B. A disc to give even Aretha pause.

Land of Dreams (Reprise). It took four producers and five years, but **Randy Newman** finally emerged with a new

studio LP that is acerbic and poignant, autobiographical and outlandish. One of the year's treasures, it was worth the wait.

Just Between Us (Columbia). **Ray Charles** takes a long-overdue trip to the sugar shack (after excesses of schlock) and joins forces with **Gladys Knight**, **B. B. King**, and **Lou Rawls** when he isn't cutting loose with molten solo turns that could make bacon smoke and stars glow fiercer in the sky.

Talk Is Cheap (Virgin). **Keith Richards** blazes rough and ready through signature Stones licks on what sounds like nothing so much as a mating call to Mick. It's sexy stuff.

Daydream Nation (Enigma). This double LP from the New York art-garage quartet **Sonic Youth** is an astonishingly rich brew that may take a while to decipher. With retuned and altered guitars, off-white noise, and shattered song structures, they deconstruct rock — while keeping it as plain as an overheard conversation in an empty loft. The results are spooky, lyrical, startling, and possibly prophetic.

The Stars We Are (Capitol). **Marc Almond**, the boldly queer voice behind "Tainted Love," gets his first solo release in the United States, and it's splendid. Buy it and hope that the New Year brings him to a club in your town.

Yeah, and the Del Rubio Triplets too. Welcome in 1989. Stick around.

—Adam Block



The Del Rubio Triplets: remaking glamour and pop in their own image

COURTESY CABAZON/BLUE YONDER SOUNDS